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NEW

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Tanks are trashed, glop is mopped**By Jerry Needham**

San Antonio Express-News

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As the acrid smell of hydrocarbons and tars permeated the air around the R&H Oil Co. site last week, a huge pincer-tipped hydraulic machine tore steel oil storage tanks into shreds of jagged metal.

The ongoing, two-month federal emergency removal action is a first step in the cleanup process of the South Side refinery site, which is the first in Bexar County to be officially proposed for the nation's list of most contaminated places.

Pollution from the seven-acre property has contaminated a shallow unused aquifer, mostly underneath the site in the 400 block of Somerset Road.

The 1/10-mile plume proposed as a Superfund site is dwarfed by the 10-square-mile plume of polluted groundwater flowing under neighborhoods from nearby Kelly AFB.

The shredded steel of 39 oil-storage tanks on the property will be recycled, said Gary Moore, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's on-scene coordinator for the site.

"We're here to remove the source materials from the tanks and from spillage to the ground and to get rid of the tanks, making it ready for the remedial program," Moore said.

A team should be on the property within six months after the removal is completed on Oct. 13 to determine what the long-term cleanup strategy should be, he said.

Moore said that since the removal started in mid-August, contractors have taken away 53,000 gallons of the estimated 74,000 gallons of oils and gooey residues in tanks at the site.

They have also removed about 20 cubic yards of asbestos insulation and tiles.

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"This is the result of years and years of non-use and not taking care of equipment," he said, pointing to pumps, boilers and rusting storage tanks from 5,000 gallons to 400,000 gallons in size.

"The majority of the remaining tanks have been emptied and pressure washed," Moore said, adding that workers still have to care of "some sludge and some real thick residue oil, which is kind of like a taffy."

Before the crews leave, they'll dig up visibly polluted areas in the top foot of soil, he said.

"We're still looking at potential enforcement actions to pay for the remedial activities," Moore said. "Once we get the evidence that we need to pursue people who have sent the waste there, or who were owners or operators out there, then we'll send notice letters to them."

The letters will ask owners or users to conduct the investigation into the pollution, as well as its cleanup, Moore said.

"If they don't, the EPA will proceed and then go back and do cost recovery against them," he said.

Six different petroleum-refining companies operated on the property from 1934 to 1987, Moore said.

Two fuel-blending companies operated from 1978 to 1990, and three different used-oil processing or storage operations were conducted from 1987 to 1992.

The property since has stood vacant, he said.

He said that all but one operator — Michigan-based Flint Chemical Co., which refined ink from petroleum — has gone out of business.

The current owner declared bankruptcy in 1991, so most of the liability for cleanup costs may fall on those who sent waste oils to the facility in its last years of operation, Moore said.

Those include service stations, auto repair shops, military installations, cities and industries, he said.

"Just because you sent waste there doesn't necessarily mean you're a bad person," Moore said. "This was a used-oil processing facility, and these facilities go out of business just like any other business."

He said that pump-and-treat systems are normally the approach to cleanup of such contaminated groundwater, but it may be two

years before remedies are in place at the site.

Pollutants that have been detected in the soil and groundwater include volatile organic compounds such as benzene, toluene and naphthalene, as well as heavy metals such as arsenic, barium, chromium, lead and zinc.

In its Superfund listing proposal, the EPA cited concerns that contaminants could leak into the Edwards Aquifer, which is separated from the shallow 50-foot-deep aquifer by more than 1,000 feet of clay and rock. But other EPA documents cite those intervening layers as a barrier to contamination of the Edwards.

Yolanda Johnson, an activist who lives near the site, said residents long have worried about contamination of the shallow aquifer and its effect on health and property values.

"I'm glad they're getting rid of it," she said. "But maybe it's a Band-Aid for how we feel about the pollution around here."

Johnson said residents are angry that Kelly, with its much more widespread contamination of the shallow aquifer, never was placed on the Superfund list.

"It seems to me like if they put this site on the Superfund, they're giving it more priority than the Kelly plume," she said.

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